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21st Century Insurgency: External Support and the CinC's Role in Countering It Using the Elements of National Power

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College
in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the
Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views
and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College,
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Abstract

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"Undoubtedly, the United States government will on occasion be involved in low intensity conflict - as a friend, as an advisor, as a banker, as a participant"¹

ADM William Crowe

"Victory in any kind of war including internal guerilla war is not simply the sum of the battles won over the course of a conflict. Rather, it is the product of connecting and weighting the various elements of national power within the context of strategic appraisals, strategic vision, and strategic objectives"²

Prof. Max Manwaring

INTRODUCTION

The absence of Marxist-Leninist ideological motivation for insurgencies following the demise of the bipolar Cold War international political order has not resulted in a reduction of insurgent activity. Insurgency continues to represent an attractive, asymmetric option for the weak to simultaneously challenge the political and military legitimacy of a standing government. Insurgency can lead to regional instability or disrupt global economics and, consequently, potentially threatens United States' interests.³ Aiding the government of a nation under siege may be in the United States' interest and, therefore, the Geographic Combatant Commander must understand the nature of 21st Century insurgency and the available options to combat it.

Insurgency remains a complex event that must be measured within the historical and cultural context within which it develops. The absence of Marxist ideology has changed the role and significance of various characteristics of insurgencies. A significant change in these characteristics is the nature, role and importance that external support plays in insurgent conflicts. The provision of external support to insurgent groups remains an important means for state and non-state actors to influence events abroad without necessarily resorting to direct intervention. Subversion represents an attractive alternative to interstate war in financial and perceptive (public affairs) terms for the actor who seeks to influence events beyond his borders. In order to understand the role that outside patronage plays in insurgency, one must first define insurgency, identify its causes and its essential characteristics. Following that, this paper shall identify the types of external support which insurgents desire in the 21st century, their associated costs, and

identify the predominant providers of this support. Finally, this essay will conclude with options available to the regional Commanders in Chief (CinC) to counter external support using the elements of national power.

BACKGROUND

Numerous definitions for insurgency are available, each with unique twists designed to place importance on a particular aspect of this complex event. For the sake of this study, the following definition, presented in a Rand Corporation study, captures the essence of insurgency:

"Insurgency is a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity - including guerilla warfare, terrorism, and political mobilization, for example, propaganda, recruitment, front and covert party organization, and international activity - is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy. The common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations, whose objectives do not include the creation of an alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country." ⁴

The above definition reveals that insurgency contains both political and military aspects. Therefore, nations seeking to influence events in an insurgent environment must be prepared to pursue a multi-dimensional approach in search of solutions to the insurgency problem.

The causes of insurgency are widespread but generally revolve around disparity manifested in either economic or political terms. Anthony Joes, author of Modern Guerrilla Insurgency, breaks the causes of insurgency into three general categories:

1) population pressures; 2) persistent inequality; and 3) unresolved religious or ethnic problems.⁵ Other causes include weak national administration, lack of political infrastructure, disenfranchisement, corruption and mismanagement, difficult civil-military relationships, the misdistribution of resources, and societal divisions.⁶ Newer influences that already fuel insurgency and certainly will continue to do so to a greater extent in the future are urbanization, globalization, and the advance of technology. The migration of populations to cities where the government is unable to provide completely for their basic human needs provides fertile soil for discontent to blossom. Additionally, globalization and technological advances in communications widely broadcast the effects of social and economic disparity and highlight the relative deprivation of the 'have nots' within the global context. As with the definition of insurgency, its causes are multi-dimensional, spanning political, economic and societal spheres, thereby greatly complicating the search for effective measures to combat it.

Four pre-conditions must exist for the emergence of an insurgent movement. First, there must exist a cause or precipitant for hostility towards the existing government. Second, there must be a discontented elite (consisting of intellectuals, professionals, etc...) willing and able to organize the effort against the government. Third, the insurgent movement must possess some measure of popular support which includes the willingness to employ violent means to achieve their ends. Finally, the movement must have the capacity to undertake the effort.⁷ Such capacity can either be internally generated and/or obtained from external sources. Eventually, some of these pre-conditions will evolve into essential elements or characteristics for the sustainment of the

insurgent movement. Common characteristics of insurgent movements include the possession of charismatic leaders able to motivate their members and the continued possession of a popular cause. Insurgent movements must possess attainable goals, a political aim intended to redress significant socio-economic disparities, and a motivating ideology. During the Cold War Marxism represented the predominant motivating ideology. However, in the aftermath of the failure of communism, 21st Century insurgents are more likely motivated by ethnic, cultural and religious ideology. Finally, in order to sustain their capacity to rebel, insurgents must have access to indigenous resources or possess outside patronage capable of fulfilling domestic inadequacies.⁸

The role of external support or outside patronage in the eventual outcome of an insurgency is a point of considerable debate. There exist four scenarios where external support plays an absolutely critical role in determining the fate of an insurgency. First, external support can tip the balance in favor of the insurgents involved in a long protracted struggle that has evolved into a stalemate. Insurgents can nearly always sustain themselves by taking what they need from the government, but when the insurgent movement is prepared to transition to a conventional phase of struggle, it almost always requires outside assistance in order to prepare logistically for the effort.⁹ Third, outside patronage in the form of material support may be the only savior for an insurgent movement in its infancy when resources are difficult to obtain. Finally, external support may be the only means to offset the advantage of outside patronage being provided to the government.

The importance of external support, therefore, is relative to other variables that

affect the insurgency, most notably the timing of the support and its relation to the insurgents' needs. Cuba represents an example of an insurgent movement which experienced ultimate victory in the near complete absence of external support. Alternatively, examples exist where the absence of external support resulted in the insurgent's defeat (Malaya and Kenya in the 1950s and Indonesia in 1965) or their inability to transition beyond terrorism and guerilla warfare (Philippines and Sri Lanka in the 1950s - prior to the emergence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam or LTTE).¹⁰ The value of external support to an insurgency is a very relative matter. Insurgency expert Bard O'Neill states, "the importance of external support depends on the situation vis-à-vis the other variables, particularly the government's response". He further elaborates that when the government performs poorly in response to the insurgency, external support is not as important, however, external support can offset the result of government successes.¹¹ Although debate revolves around the relative historical importance of external support, nobody contends that it is not a characteristic of nearly every insurgency. Regardless of one's opinion on the importance of external support's role, at some point during almost every modern insurgency, the rebels have required and actively sought some measure of outside patronage to assist their cause. Today, under the pressure of increased globalization with its technological advancements and the new post-Cold War international system, the role of external support certainly remains important, if not more important than ever, in determining the outcome of an insurgency.

What Insurgents Need from External Supporters

The types of external support provided to insurgent movements can be broken

down into three categories. Critical support includes safe haven/sanctuary, financial support, political support and propaganda, and direct military support. Valuable forms of support encompass the provision of training and weapons/material. Minor forms of support include manpower, intelligence, organizational aid, and inspiration.¹²

The most critical form of external support is safe haven or sanctuary. Safe haven protects leadership and provides a place for training, planning, and rest. Sanctuary allows the insurgents to dictate the timing and pace of operations. Safe haven denies government forces the advantage of hot pursuit and is especially important as a staging area during an escalatory phase of the movement since it protects precious resources. Bernard Fall argues that, "in brutal fact, the success or failure of all rebellions since World War II depended entirely on whether the active sanctuary was willing and able to perform its role".¹³ Sanctuary can be provided actively with the host government's full knowledge and consent or passively due to the host government's inability to control its borders or remote regions.

Critical outside patronage also includes financial support which insurgents use for just about everything from purchasing arms and ammunition to paying their soldiers to procuring necessary logistical items. Often, significant financial means can buoy an insurgency temporarily beset by inadequate popular support. Additionally, wealth may offset government successes and manage to maintain the morale and dedication of the insurgent force over protracted periods. Suffice to say that insurgents can never have too much money at their disposal.

Political support and propaganda represent another critical form of assistance

since they offer the rebels access to diplomatic channels, international aid and infer legitimacy upon the insurgent movement. The effective use of external propaganda support may help to increase popular support, legitimize the rebel cause and discredit the existing government.

Finally, direct military support or intervention can critically alter the insurgent's environment by drastically tilting the balance of power within the conflict. Such intervention is rare in modern insurgency, but does have a tremendous impact as evidenced by Ugandan and Rwandan conventional military support to the rebel forces of Laurent Kabila in the Congo near the end of the 20th Century.¹⁴

The valuable forms of support, training and weapons/material, although extremely important to possess, need not necessarily come from the outside patron. Training, although helpful in the earliest stages of a rebellion, is most effective when self-taught. According to a Rand Corporation study, self-developed cadres, most often former government soldiers, offer the best source of training in military tactics for insurgent movements.¹⁵ Likewise, insurgents must possess weapons and material to further their cause. However, with proper financial resources these items are available for purchase in the contemporary global marketplace in sufficient quantities to sustain the rebels.

The minor forms of support, which include manpower, intelligence, organizational aid and inspiration, likewise are not best provided by the external supporter. Use of foreign manpower invites great risk for the rebel and will be discussed later in the section on the costs of external support. Intelligence and organizational assistance, on the other hand, while vitally important to the movement are most often best

developed by the insurgents themselves. Should either of these elements not be available from an external supporter, the movement must develop them on its own. Finally, externally provided inspiration, the best examples of which were Marxism/Leninism and Maoism during the Cold War, can only be effective for a finite period of time. Ultimately, all insurgencies require local appeal which today most often develops upon an ethnic or religious foundation.¹⁶ A final word regarding the forms of externally provided support requires emphasis; "in gauging the effects of outside assistance, it is critical to recognize that its value is directly related to what the insurgents can and cannot acquire by themselves."¹⁷

Providers of External Support

The Cold War international order offered a relatively simple framework in which to determine the providers of external support. For reasons of superpower competition, the Soviet Union and the United States found themselves on opposite sides of the external support equation in almost every insurgent conflict from 1945-1989. Due to their access to enormous resources, the two superpowers also minimized the impact of support provided by other actors with interest in a given conflict. Steven Metz captured the changed nature of the dimension of external support by stating, "Insurgents will still search for outside assistance in the post-Cold War world, but the source and motives of outside supporters will be more complex than during the Cold War."¹⁸ The contemporary providers of external support are nation-states, diasporas, and other non-state actors, including refugees.¹⁹

Today the nation-state remains the single most important provider of external

support to insurgent movements, however, its importance has declined with the emergence of non-state actors. Additionally, nation-state providers of support now hope to increase their regional influence as opposed to the global context in which state support was provided by the superpowers during the Cold War. States provide insurgents with sanctuary, material, training, financial and political support, and at times direct military assistance. State support is vital when an insurgent group faces a powerful government and in such cases, safe haven represents the most important aspect of state support. Geopolitics rather than ideology, ethnicity or religion determine the primary motive for state provided support. States act in their own self-interest when supporting foreign insurgents in order to gain regional influence, destabilize their neighbors, increase their prestige, support groups with whom they share a common cultural bond or simply to gain plunder. Generally, the scope of state support has significantly decreased in scale since the Cold War's end.²⁰

Diasporas, described as co-ethnic communities residing in other countries, have emerged as an important provider of external support to insurgency. "Significant diaspora support has occurred in every region of the globe, except Latin America" and its role may become increasingly more common.²¹ The most important change in the dynamics of external support since 1989 is the role and growth in importance of such non-state actors. The LTTE represents an active and successful insurgency that enjoys great support from its immigrant communities located abroad. The strength and influence of diasporas in effecting events in their homeland are greatly facilitated by globalization and advancements in communications capabilities. Diasporic support best

manifests itself in finance generation and propaganda support. Financial support can be either direct contributions, funds laundered through Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) or money raised through legitimate businesses operating within foreign immigrant communities. Propaganda support, exercised through pressure groups, can generate sympathy and international legitimacy for the rebel cause. Ethnic and religious considerations often motivate diasporas. Sometimes a sense of guilt from enjoying safety and freedom while their brethren engage in struggle causes migrants to give support to their maximum capability. Although gaining in relative significance to state support, diasporas are unable to provide the full range of patronage available through state sponsorship and are primarily limited to financial and political support.²²

Refugees, other rebel groups, religious organizations, wealthy individuals, and NGOs represent other groups capable of providing valuable support to insurgents. The role of these groups is much less significant than either the state or diaspora. Internal fighting often creates refugees and these refugees can become a potential manpower source for the insurgents. Additionally, when dwelling under the auspices of a weak host nation, refugees can often act with impunity while supporting insurgents with both manpower and sanctuary within refugee camps. Although they possess limited power and influence, these other non-government actors can have an impact during the early stages of insurgency, where even the slightest measure of support can provide great assistance to the rebels. Individuals provide external support to insurgent groups mainly with financing. Osama bin Laden's financial and organizational support for the Taliban during their struggle to gain control of Afghanistan represents a prime example of a

single individual's impact on an insurgent movement. Finally, international aid agencies and human rights groups can indirectly support insurgent efforts by calling sympathetic attention to the rebel cause or by inadvertently providing resources to the rebels.²³

The Cost of External Support

The provision of external support to an insurgent movement should not be perceived as a guarantee for rebel victory. In fact, the acceptance and employment of external support can introduce complications to the struggle. External material support, as with foreign manpower, can diminish a movement's nationalist, ethnic, or religious credibility. External support can also limit the freedom of action available to insurgents since it may come with a price. Finally, external support can be fickle and dry up at the most inopportune times.

While the state sponsor is the best source of support, there is a downside. Often the provider acts in its own interests and imposes political or military restrictions on the insurgents as a condition for the support. Additionally, in providing support, the donor inevitably develops leverage within the insurgent movement which can be used to exploit leadership or organizational rifts to its own advantage.²⁴ Diasporas and other non-state actors, on the other hand, possess little chance of exercising leverage over the internal dynamics of an insurgent movement. However, the extent of support these groups can provide is also limited. In summation, the acceptance of external support introduces new variables into the insurgent equation that bring with them potentially expensive costs for the long-term prospects of insurgent success. "Excessive reliance on external support can

undercut the virtues and diminish the martial capabilities of a guerilla movement"²⁵ and as insurgency analyst Gerard Chaliand advises, "every seriously organized guerilla movement is well advised to rely mainly on its own resources."²⁶

Countering External Support using the Elements of National Power

"Sound military operations cannot compensate for bad political practices in insurgency".²⁷ The political-military complexity of insurgent conflicts requires a multi-dimensional approach to combating them. The Geographic Combatant Commanders or Regional Commanders in Chief (CinC) are the best positioned and empowered United States' resource to organize and execute the response to insurgent movements which threaten our national interests. Of all the alternatives, the CinC is best able to orchestrate and employ elements of national power early in the conflict. And it is in this early phase when intervention (by all means - diplomatic, informational, militarily, and economic) has the best probability of success. The CinC possesses a robust staff with sufficient expertise to lead an interagency effort which, in turn, will ensure the proper leveraging of each aspect of national power. Finally, the regional CinCs, due to their experience, possess the leadership traits necessary to determine the unique nature of an insurgent movement and lead the effort to combat it.

The complex political-military nature of insurgency means that a CinC must conduct such a struggle in several dimensions simultaneously. To determine government legitimacy, to engage in direct warfare, to isolate the guerillas from the population, to 'stay the course' and to provide unity of effort all must occur in counterinsurgency. The CinC must employ measures to wage the struggle within each of these arenas at the same

time.²⁸ Ultimately, the outcome of the insurgency will be determined by the side which is the most legitimate governor, the best organized (unity of effort), who received the best and most consistent outside assistance, who was best able to reduce outside assistance to their foe, who possessed the best intelligence, and whose forces displayed the most discipline and capability.²⁹

Focusing on the specific characteristic of external support, CinCs can combat insurgent movements using all of the elements of national power via two means. They can counter external supporters by undercutting their motives and capabilities or they can combat outside patrons by countering the effects which their support has on the insurgent struggle. Some of the measures presented below may be employed at the discretion of the CinC and others will require interagency coordination and ultimate National Command Authorities (NCA) approval. However, regardless of the approval level, the CinC represents the best national resource to lead the planning effort and supervise the application of the elements of national power when countering insurgency.

Diplomatic measures can directly limit the effectiveness of externally provided support. Diplomacy targeted at the donor state, in order to block support, is one of the measures available to the CinC. Diplomacy may be conducted quietly in an attempt to persuade the donor state to cease or alter its activities, possibly in return for various political concessions. The intent with this type of measure is to appeal to a greater interest of the donor which causes the donor to alter its behavior. Should pressure fail, CinCs can recommend the employment of more coercive diplomacy. Coercive measures include the threat of sanctions or terminating aid, breaking diplomatic ties or even

constructing a coalition against the donor state.³⁰ CinCs may also employ diplomatic measures to cause neighboring states to deny the use of their territory for safe haven, whether sanctuary is actually sponsored or only tolerated. The goal in dealing with neighboring states which provide sanctuary is to ideally render them unsympathetic or at least to make them neutral to the insurgent cause.³¹ In order to build consensus and legitimize our policy, both regional and international coalitions, alliances, or forums may be constructed in order to place pressure on the donor to relent.

When the targeted donor is a non-state actor, CinCs must target the conditions that allow for the provision of support. For example, diplomatic efforts can encourage nations which host a diasporic external patron to better police immigrant communities as a means to strangle support. Undertaking measures to eliminate this type of support is expensive. Therefore, government's hosting diasporas must be pressured and rewarded when they undertake measures such as enforcing border controls, gathering intelligence, and restricting fund raising in order to eliminate valuable means of support.³² Another measure of diplomatic pressure which may be applied to the host of a diasporic patron is to encourage the assimilation of the migrant community into the culture of their new country. This will break the socio-cultural bonds which migrants share with the insurgents back in the homeland.³³ Finally, the Theater Commander can recommend and oversee the application of diplomatic pressure on the government that the United States supports in countering insurgency. This pressure intends to redress the root cause of the insurgent movement by inducing socio-economic reform, ensuring the effective use of the host nation military forces, eliminating corruption, establishing effective governance

and closing insurgent sanctuary within the host nation.³⁴

The informational element of national power should attack the legitimacy of the insurgent movement. To reduce the impact of external support, the information effort should target the insurgents, their external supporters and groups inside the external support state. The aim in targeting the insurgents and their external supporters is to create distrust by stressing differences or past antagonisms.³⁵ Targeting groups within the external support state may cause such groups to undertake civic action to effect a change in their government's policy of supporting an insurgent movement. Additionally, the CinC may formulate a propaganda (psychological operations or Psyop) effort which advertises to the population of the outside patron that activities supporting an insurgency are counter to their best interests. In all but the most totalitarian of regimes, such an effort may encourage popular sentiment to rise against the provision of external support. A similar Psyop theme can appeal to population in the contested country and stress that the insurgents' reliance on outside support has caused them to sell-out their original nationalistic goals to those of their patron. Finally, as a general measure to combat future insurgencies, CinCs can urge the NCA, the Intelligence Community and the services to develop a more robust and effective national human intelligence capability. Such a capability can greatly influence the CinC's situational awareness while combating an insurgency. "Growing understanding of the nature of low intensity conflict and its greater likelihood has helped create understanding for why intelligence direct from human sources must be enhanced".³⁶

Options for employing economic elements of national power include threatening

and, if necessary, implementing specific or general trade sanctions against the provider of external support. Specific, targeted measures may include preventing the flow of arms and material to insurgents while general sanctions would place an embargo on all trade with the external provider until their provision of support to the insurgents ceases.

Sanctions may be enforced through international cooperation or through a NCA directed, CinC executed quarantine of the outside patron's trading ports. A final economic measure at the CinC's disposal is to identify and target the mechanisms by which donors provide financial assistance to insurgents. Disrupting the flow of money to insurgents from an outside patron through offshore banks and illegitimate businesses represents an indirect technique for influencing the effects of a donor's support.

The military element of national power is the most tenuous option available to a CinC when countering any characteristic of insurgency. Trained in war-fighting, the tendency of a soldier is to overemphasize the military element of power and merely enforce his will upon the insurgent. However, the complexity of the political component of insurgency makes the application of military power precarious. The NCA and CinC should use the direct application of United States military power only as a last resort when combating insurgency. Direct military intervention can undermine the legitimacy of the government we intend to protect and lessens their willingness to undertake the struggle on their own behalf. However, the CinC possesses a multitude of options for indirectly employing the military element of power to counter the effects of an external patron. General Galvin, former Commander in Chief of the United States European Command, urges that nation building represents the best use of the military

arm of power, focusing on assistance in the development of apolitical military institutions, the subordination of the military to civilian control and its incorporation into the structure of government.³⁷ This nation building approach is an indirect way to combat the effect of external support and other factors within an insurgency.

Training indigenous military and police forces in the methods of countering insurgency displays another indirect military application of power. Training as a counter to external support consists of foreign internal defense measures and practices to moderate the behavior of government soldiers. Training military leaders in the tactics of counterinsurgency and in basic leadership skills will ensure a tactically sound approach to waging the insurgent conflict without isolating the population, whose loyalty the government seeks to earn or maintain. The CinC's Theater Engagement Plan outlines where he intends to conduct the shaping operations necessary to create favorable conditions for military action and to maintain regional stability. Deployed U.S military personnel within the theater represent quality 'eyes and ears' for the CinC to provide early warning and the possibility of early intervention to counter an insurgency.

CONCLUSION

In the post Cold War world, insurgency remains the most prevalent expression of armed conflict. External support to insurgent movements represents an important characteristic of all insurgencies. Following the collapse of leftist ideology, the sources of external support are the most changed aspect of insurgent warfare. Although the providers of external support and their impact on individual rebellions have changed, the costs for accepting outside patronage have remained relatively constant. In the future, as

has been the case in the past, the United States may find it necessary to aid a nation under siege from an insurgent movement. In these circumstances the Geographic Combatant Commander remains the best-positioned resource to orchestrate the counterinsurgent effort and protect the nation's interests. When assisting friendly governments and countering external support to insurgent movements, the CinC must balance and leverage all the elements of national power in order to succeed.

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ENDNOTES

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